

10-1-2014

Impact of 4-H on Alumni's Community Involvement

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Recommended Citation

Merten, K., Locke, D., Williams, M., Carter, M., & Lehman, K. (2014). Impact of 4-H on Alumni's Community Involvement. *The Journal of Extension*, 52(5), Article 4. <https://doi.org/10.34068/joe.52.05.04>

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Impact of 4-H on Alumni's Community Involvement

Abstract

The quantitative, non-experimental descriptive study reported here sought to measure how being alumni of the Texas 4-H and Youth Development Program influenced their decisions toward community involvement and leadership positions within communities. Former Texas 4-H alumni at least 18 years of age were the assessable population. The study confirms former 4-Hers are using what they learned in the 4-H program by staying involved in their community organizations and holding leadership positions. Organizations listed at the top by most volunteers included: 4-H Volunteer, Church Organization, and Fair Board/Livestock Association/Group. Leadership positions most frequently held include president and secretary.

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Introduction

The 4-H Youth Development program has a rich history of building future leaders and strong citizens through the projects and programs it offers. This is evident through the numerous documented studies of the life skills youth develop as a result of their participation in a 4-H program (Anderson, Bruce, & Mouton, 2010; Fox, Schroeder, & Lodi, 2003; Seevers & Dormody, 1995). Life skills such as communication, decision-making, and problem solving are gained when 4-H members participate in hands-on learning activities (Pennington & Edwards, 2006).

Several studies have shown experience in a 4-H program results in valuable leadership and life skills that could be later used in college, the workforce and in the community (Anderson et al., 2010; Park & Dyer, 2005; Radhakrishna & Sinasky, 2005). Flynn, Frick, and Steele reported Montana 4-H Alumni hailed 4-H participation as the second most influential factor contributing to their success as a community leader. The three 4-H experiences that had the greatest impact on one's adult life were "taught you how to participate in the conduct of meetings," "influenced you to participate in community activities," and "helped you in developing leadership skills" (2010, p. 8).

Pennington (2006) stated, "Youth involved in serving their communities develop a lifelong pattern of civic

engagement" (p. 1). Toppe and Michel (2002) found that adults who were active as volunteers in their youth were more likely to give to their communities through volunteering and personal resources. Regardless of age or income, volunteering as a youth transcended into adulthood, especially in young adults, who had an almost double rate of volunteering as an adult compared to other young adults who had not volunteered as a youth.

Within the past several years, major changes have resulted in increasing accountability demands upon all Extension programming, including 4-H (Barkman & Machtmes, 2001). Funders at both state and federal levels have charged youth serving agencies to develop methods of evaluating their programs to document positive benefits of program participation.

The development of life skills allows youth to cope with their environment by making responsible decisions, having a better understanding of their values, and being better able to communicate and get along with others. The development of such skills through experiential learning is the cornerstone of the 4-H program (Boyd, Herring, & Briers, 1992). Fox et al. (2003) reported that 4-H club membership did have a primary or some influence on the development of all 32 life skills identified in their study of 264 4-H alumni. Fox et al. and several others used life skills identified by the Targeting Life Skills Model (Hendricks, 1998; Bailey & Deen, 2002). Impact studies using the Targeting Life Skills Model have the potential to show not only how 4-H programming has influenced youth, but, moreover, how 4-H alumni are currently influencing their communities and the nation (Pennington & Edwards, 2006).

Purpose and Objectives

The primary purpose of the study reported here was to determine if 4-H participation influenced former members' involvement in community organizations as adults and how it influenced their commitment to leadership in those organizations. The following objectives guided the study.

1. Describe the personal characteristics of participants;
2. Determine whether involvement as a 4-H member motivated participants to be involved in helping their community; and
3. Describe community leadership positions held by participants.

Procedures and Methods

The quantitative, non-experimental descriptive study sought to measure how being alumni of the Texas 4-H and Youth Development Program influenced their decisions toward community involvement, leadership positions within communities, life skill development, education, and career choices.

The population for the study consisted of former Texas 4-Hers who were 18 years and older (June 2013) at the time the sample was taken. A convenience sample ($N = 2,491$) was taken of all participants who were registered as former 4-H members in the state's online registration system. Fraenkel and Wallen (2009) wrote that purposive sampling is a "nonrandom sample selected because prior knowledge suggests it is representative, or because those selected have the needed information" (p. G-7).

A four-section online survey instrument was developed to collect data. The instrument used was originally used for a study conducted by Boleman, Merten, and Hall (2008). The first section contained seven questions relative to community involvement. The second section included five questions relative to participants' education and occupations. The third section had two questions and 12 statements relative to life skill development. The 12 statements were based on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Not Influential at

All, 2 = Somewhat Influential, 3 = Influential, and 4 = Highly Influential. The fourth section focused on personal demographics and characteristics including age, gender, race, and other personal characteristics.

The instrument was evaluated for content and face validity by a panel of experts consisting of 4-H faculty, a 4-H program leader, and Extension administrators. The Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University approved the study (#IRB2013-0177). The 12 life skills statements were evaluated for internal consistencies using Cronbach's coefficient alpha before responses were analyzed. After piloting the instrument, a Cronbach's coefficient alpha of .916 was established, compared to a coefficient alpha of .904 by Boleman, Merten, and Hall (2008), indicating a strong internal consistency measure. After review and slight modifications, the survey was deemed ready to be administered to participants.

Using Dillman et al.'s Tailored Design Method (2009), the questionnaire was sent electronically using Qualtrics, a Web-based survey platform. The participants were contacted using four points of contact: pre-notification email, survey link email, follow-up email, and thank you email (Dillman et al., 2009). This included a pre-notification email sent to all 2,491 participants, followed by an emailed link to the instrument. Researchers followed up with non-respondents by resending the initial link to the instrument. A total of 435 alumnus responded, for a response rate of 17%. Complete and usable data were provided by 369 participants, for a response rate of 14.8%. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize data in SPSS® version 19. Last, qualitative data were collected, summarized, and placed into like themes to illustrate community leadership positions held by participants of the study.

Results/Findings

Objective 1 - Personal Characteristics

Two hundred and thirty-three of the 435 (58.8%) respondents stated one or more of their parents were not 4-H members (39 did not provide a response). Seventeen percent of respondents ($n = 67$) had an individual annual gross income of more than \$90,000, 13.7% ($n = 54$) between \$50,000 - 59,000, and 10.9% ($n = 43$) between \$40,000 - 49,000 (41 did not disclose). Forty-three percent ($n = 171$) of respondents stated they lived on a farm or ranch (40 did not respond). Fifty-four percent ($n = 213$) of respondents were between the ages of 40 and 50 years (40 did not respond). Seventy-eight percent ($n = 303$) of the respondents were female (44 did not respond). Ninety-six percent ($n = 378$) of the respondents were White/Caucasian (40 did not respond).

Objective 2 - Community Involvement

Participants were asked to indicate whether their involvement in 4-H motivated them to be involved in helping their community. Three hundred and thirty-two of 435 (90%) responded that 4-H had motivated them to be involved in helping their community (66 did not respond). Additionally, participants were asked to indicate how many hours a month they spent volunteering in their community. Results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1.
Frequencies and Percentages of Volunteer Hours/Month from
4-H Alumni ($n = 435$)

Category	Subcategory	f^a	%
Volunteer Hours	Less than 5 hours	41	11.1

6 – 10 hours	106	28.6
11 – 15 hours	85	23.0
16 – 20 hours	45	12.2
More than 20 hours	93	25.1
Note. Frequencies' do not total 435 because of missing data.		

To gain a better appreciation of what type of organizations Texas 4-H alumni were involved, participants were asked to indicate what organizations in which they were active in their community (Table 2). The organizations that had the three highest frequencies by participants were 1) 4-H Volunteer ($f = 314$, 72.2%), 2) Church Organizations ($f = 289$, 66.4%), and 3) Fair Board / Livestock Show Association / Group ($f = 189$, 43.4%). Respondents were afforded the opportunity to provide multiple responses.

Table 2.
Ranked Frequencies and Percentages of Community Volunteer Involvement by 4-H Alumni

Category	Subcategory	f^a	%
Community Involvement	4-H Volunteer	314	72.2
	Church Organizations	289	66.4
	Fair Board / Livestock Show Association / Group	189	43.4
	Youth Sports Program	160	36.8
	Booster Club	141	32.4
	PTO / PTC	91	20.9
	Chamber of Commerce	41	9.4
	Boy Scouts	22	5.1
	Girl Scouts	17	3.9
	School Board	17	3.9
	Lions Club	13	3.0
	FFA	11	2.5
	Junior League	9	2.1
	Kiwanis	9	2.1
	Rotary	7	1.6
	Mason	7	1.6
Child Advocacy Programs	6	1.4	
Relay for Life	5	1.1	

Note. Frequencies' do not total 435 because of missing data.

Objective 3 - Community Leadership Positions Held by Former 4-H Alumnus

Participants were asked to indicate whether they currently hold any leadership positions in any community organizations they serve in. Two hundred and twenty-eight of 435 (62.0%) participants stated they currently hold leadership positions in a community organization (67 did not respond). Those who answered yes were also asked to indicate (in an open-ended section) what positions they held in their community organizations. Two hundred and thirty participants provided responses to leadership positions they hold. From the 230 responses, 17 leadership positions emerged, which yielded a total of 337 leadership positions (some participants provided more than one leadership position) (Table 3). Last, 249 of 435 (70.3%) participants indicated their involvement in 4-H influenced them to seek out the leadership positions they currently hold.

Table 3.

Ranked Frequencies and Percentages of Volunteer Leadership Positions Held by 4-H Alumni

Category	Subcategory	f^a	%
Leadership Positions	President	44	13.1
	Secretary	42	12.5
	Treasurer	31	9.2
	Board Member	31	9.2
	4-H Club Manager	30	8.9
	Committee Chair	30	8.9
	4-H Adult Leader	21	6.2
	4-H Project Leader	19	5.6
	Vice President	17	5.0
	Director	15	4.5
	Teacher	12	3.6
	Coach	10	3.0
	Committee Member	9	2.7
	Officer	8	2.4
	Co-chairman	7	2.1
	Contest/Stock Show	6	1.8
	Superintendent		

	Coordinator	5	1.5
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Conclusions and Recommendations

The 4-H Pledge provides the framework of the Targeting Life Skills Model (Hendricks, 1998). Each of the four H's: Head, Heart, Hands, and Health contain seven to 10 competencies that, when delivered in age-appropriate contexts of experiences, promotes mastery in that area. The "Giving" section under Hands includes community-service and volunteering, leadership, responsible citizenship, and contributions to group effort (Norman & Jordan, n.d.). The following results best summarize the study.

1. The study confirms former 4-Hers are using what they learned in the 4-H Program and staying involved by volunteering in community organizations ($f = 332$; 90%). Organizations listed at the top by most volunteers included: 4-H Volunteer ($f = 314$; 72.2%), Church Organization ($f = 289$; 66.4%), and Fair Board/Livestock Association/Group ($f = 189$; 43.4%).
2. Over half of those individuals who involved in community organizations also held leadership positions ($f = 228$; 62%). Overall, the office of president ($f = 44$; 13.1%) and secretary ($f = 42$; 12.5%) were identified by participants as the most frequently held offices in volunteer organizations.

As a result of findings from the study, researchers will be able to use data to be more strategic in their planning, implementation, and evaluation of their Extension programs. Results show 4-H is having a lasting impression on how alumni become involved in their community, both in 4-H and non 4-H related organizations.

Recommendations for 4-H and Non 4-H Programming

- Use findings to demonstrate 4-H's impact on community involvement.
- Assist county Extension agents and 4-H program specialists in identifying and developing innovative programs to keep youth involved their communities.
- Apply study to non 4-H organizations to see the effects they have on their alumni when volunteering in community organizations.

Recommendations for Extension Administration

- Use findings to illustrate the long-term effects 4-H has on its alumni to community and statewide stakeholders.
- Assist in determining economic impact of volunteer hours contributed to community organizations.

Future Research

Many opportunities to further study the impact of 4-H programs on community involvement are obtainable. Future research should be conducted to:

- Determine if former 4-Hers have a different experience as it relates to community involvement when growing up in rural settings versus those growing up in an urban setting.

- Identify whether there is a correlation between former 4-Hers education background and leadership positions in community organizations.
- Compare 4-H alumnus with today's adults that were not in 4-H to see if there is a difference.

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